

INDEXA



Summer 2009

www.indexa.org

Issue 86

A non-profit organization for the enhancement of amateur radio, worldwide peace, and friendship
Daily Information Session — 14.236 MHz @ 23:30z

K5D — Desecheo '09 A Series of Firsts

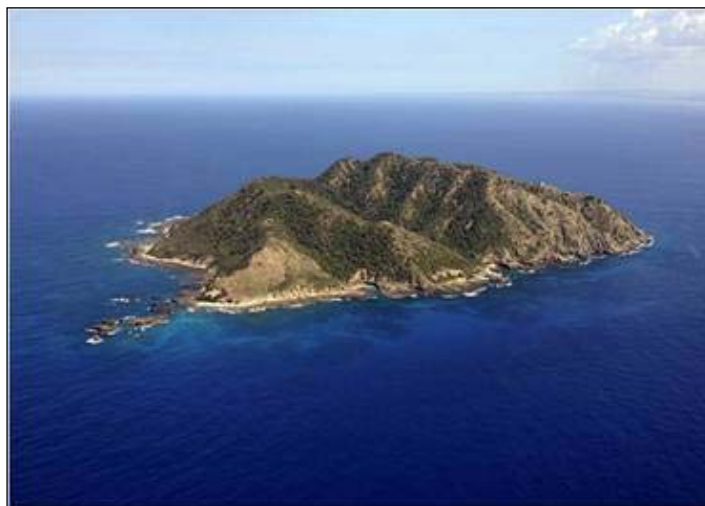
By Mike Thomas, NA5U

On February 13, 2009 at 1600Z the first QSO was in the log for K5D. Thirteen days later the QSO count would be 115, 787 QSOs and K5D from Desecheo National Wildlife Refuge was history. The first DXpedition approved by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) since 1993 would be the first of many firsts for this DXpedition. I want to tell you about this adventure of a lifetime and the series of firsts for the K5D Team.

For me this adventure began in the summer of 2001. Because of an intense work schedule, I had been absent from amateur radio and specifically DXing for 5-years. That summer, having decided it was time to end this break from DXing, I attended HamCom. It is held in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area, and is the largest amateur radio gathering in this part of the country. It was here that I learned of the difficulties that had developed regarding Desecheo and Navassa Islands. So this 8-year adventure began. This was also the genesis of the KP1-5 Project and its efforts to reopen the islands for responsible amateur radio use.

First Mega-DXpedition.....

This was to be the first Mega-DXpedition operating from Desecheo National Wildlife Refuge. This was also the first Mega-DXpedition for me. I've operated from a few DX locations around the world as a one-man operation; it was a thrill to be a part of one like this. My previous adventures were from Australia (which was to include Lord Howe but it didn't work out), South Africa, Swaziland and brief guest-op from G-land. For other operators in the group it was also their first Mega-DXpedition and in some cases their



Desecheo National Wildlife Refuge

first DXpedition and, for many, the first time to operate from one of our nation's national wildlife refuges. This is where I was the veteran of the bunch. I've now operated from five national wildlife refuges and by the end of the year number six should be in the log with more to follow.

You have to experience a Mega-DXpedition to fully appreciate what is involved in pulling it off. The planning, logistics and execution required to have a successful operation are on par with a significant military operation. As a matter of fact, I have been involved in many military operations that pale in comparison to this DXpedition. Fortunately, Bob Allphin, K4UEE and Glenn Johnson, M.D., W0GJ provided the rock solid leadership that was required for success.

No discussion of planning would be complete without

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inside... 2009 Elections on the horizon

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mention of the 200+ page proposal that was drafted and submitted as a part of the selection process. It set out in great detail the plans and contingences for the DXpedition. Additionally, a 200+ page operator manual was drafted for each operator. Everyone was responsible to fully understand and abide by this op-plan.



Camp Desecheo close up. Camp was set up on the helicopter pad visible in the aerial view on Page 1.

First focus on Europe and Asia.....

With the island's overall ranking of #6 most needed in the world, #3 in EU and #2 in Asia, this factor of two made these regions a major consideration. Consequently, early in the planning stages it was determined that Europe and Asia would be a primary focus for the DXpedition.

Because of antenna locations of previous operations, EU was always at a disadvantage. We knew that we had to make a serious effort to get as many EU operators in the log as possible for our DXpedition to be considered successful.

We also knew that we would need a very good signal in order to work the pileup down. The Co-leaders made these intentions known early by issuing press releases explaining that when the band was open to a specific area that we would have everyone else QRX.

We had a rare opportunity, as DXpeditions go, to visit the island before the operation. Four members

of the team flew to Puerto Rico in mid-December for a reconnaissance mission. They arranged transportation to Desecheo from Puerto Rico, looked for storage facilities for our equipment, had a meeting with FWS officials, and found sources for our supplies. The highlight of the trip came on day three of the stay when they visited Desecheo. No radio was permitted, only a site survey to plan our station locations and antenna placement.



W0GJ, K0IR, and K4UEE survey antenna locations from "EU Ridge". The record setting 30M antenna is in the foreground. (This photo taken during DXpedition, not on the recon trip.)

As mentioned, earlier operations from Desecheo did not have good antenna locations to provide unobstructed paths to Europe. Antennas were usually placed on the beach and were satisfactory for North America, South America, and to some extent, Asia,

The *INDEXA Newsletter* is a quarterly publication of the International DX Association.

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but the path to Europe was blocked. While on the island, Ralph, K0IR crawled through a row of brush at the north end of the helipad. He had found a small clearing about 100 feet above the sea. It would be an excellent site for a small yagi and a vertical. It would work well for a path to North America and Asia. He continued to survey the landscape and spotted a high ridge to the east of the helipad. He asked a FWS official if he could climb to the ridge and was told he could. After climbing to the top of the ridge, he looked in amazement. When he stood atop the ridge, there was nothing between him and Europe except salt water. He shouted to the rest of the team, waving for them to come to the ridge. A 30 meter vertical, an 80 meter vertical, and a WARC beam would be placed in this area. Europe would hear us! This location would come to be known as 'EU Ridge'. Much time and energy was spent to ensure that this unique opportunity would be leveraged to its full extent. The picture below shows the complete antenna layout.

First helicopter DXpedition.....

This was the first DXpedition to Desecheo that used helicopters to enter the island. Why? The answer is two-fold. First, the USFWS established a 14-day period for the operation. There was no flexibility in the dates—once they were set; they were set. Secondly, safety became a major concern which was fully understood after arriving in Puerto Rico. This concern was further reinforced when a storm hit the island when it was time to rotate teams. Landing by boat would have been deadly!

The planning for the DXpedition initially was centered on boat transport and landing as in the past. However, following the December 2008 reconnaissance trip, it became obvious that boat transportation could severely impact a DXpedition of this size and scope. Since the Special Use Permit (SUP, see sidebar on the next page) was issued for a finite amount of time, anything that could be done to enable stations to be put on the air without delay must be considered. Additionally, tons of equipment and

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K5D Antenna Layout. Note the churning seas that washed away the beach antennas the next day.

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Another load of equipment arriving on the helipad.

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supplies were needed to support 25 people for the 14-day period. The trek from the boat landing to the op-site was over a quarter-mile of grueling and treacherous terrain. Movement of this amount of equipment and supplies would mean wasted time and a team that was exhausted before a single station was operational. Another vote for something else; that something else was helicopters. As it turns out, the USFWS use helicopters to visit the island at times; so the hunt was on. Bob Allphin, K4UEE spent countless hours making telephone calls to find and arrange for suitable helicopter transport.

Bob's efforts resulted in arrangements being made for the use of a Super Puma—a helicopter that was capable of carrying very large loads. This meant that all personnel and equipment could be on the island in just a few hours and K5D would be on the air before the end of the first day.

Sounds like a plan. Well, as plans sometimes go, Murphy took charge of this one (for the moment).

Special Use Permit

A Special Use Permit (SUP) must be issued to enter any United States National Wildlife Refuge to conduct any activities not previously established for that Refuge. With the issuance of the SUP on February 11, 2009, 'Desecheo 2009' was the first USFWS authorized amateur radio operation on the island since 1997.

Just days before the team was to depart for Puerto Rico, we were informed the Super Puma was no longer available; as a matter of fact, no helicopters were available. A mad rush was on to recover.

So what was the answer? Were we back to a complete boat based DXpedition? Could other helicopters be arranged? Would it be a combination of both? Anxieties ran high. There were only days before the DXpedition was to be on the air and remember, the dates were fixed.

When we arrived in Puerto Rico much of the transportation issue remained unresolved. Our first evening there we had dinner with some local hams. One of the hams was Rudy, KP4RAT. During dinner our dilemma was discussed. He agreed to see if he could help. As it turns out, a few days later Rudy was able to intervene and the original company was back in the picture. It wasn't going to be the Super Puma but it was better than an all-boat solution. We are indebted to KP4RAT for his help!

The loss of the Super Puma meant almost 40 trips to the island rather than seven. This meant more time would be required to get everything on the island, and we would not be on the air as soon as previously planned. It also meant more cost. All that said; this was the best solution to achieve our goals and maximize the DXpedition's operating time.

So the plan was set, it would be helicopters as the main transport with boat re-supply at the appropriate times during the operation. This lovingly became known as 'Plan B', which amazingly came together in a 48-hour period. It included a hybrid of helicopters from the Super Puma company and another helicopter from another company to transport personnel, plus a boat. At one point the boats that were going to be hired would be more properly classified as the 'KP5 Flotilla'. It was going to consist of multiple boats from multiple ports but fortunately that was not necessary.

First DXpedition to crack the 100K QSO barrier from Desecheo.....

Today's large DXpeditions aspire to reach or exceed the 100K QSO mark. Our initial target was 80K QSOs with the hope of possibly reaching the 100K mark. Many factors come in to play for this goal to

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K5D on the air!

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be reached. First and foremost is the solar cycle. As we all know, K5D took place at the bottom of cycle 23. We had hoped for an uptick in the indices while we were there but that was not to be.

We had committed to USFWS that our effort would try to remove Desecheo from the 'Top 100 Most Needed List'. So, plans included multiple stations all equipped with amplifiers and an antenna farm that would ensure that we would be heard around the world. The first QSOs took place 1600Z on February 13, 2009. That contact was with N2WB and ended with K6BAG at 0939Z on February 26th. Between these two QSOs were 115,785 other contacts that rank this DXpedition as the number seventh ranked DXpedition of all time

Another first was included in the total 115,787 QSOs. That was a record breaking 30M DXpedition with 15,657 QSOs being made. Thirty meters is a wonderful DX band. On my second shift while operating 30M RTTY, I was amazed to hear callsigns from North and South America, Europe and Asia; all at the same time! So, if you are not checking 30M for DX you may be missing out.

Something special... I mentioned earlier that this was my first large DXpedition; so the whole process was a big unknown. What would it be like? Would I



K4UEE celebrates reaching 100K QSOs. Since Bob is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of INDEXA, it was appropriate that INDEXA flag was nearby when he did so.

be able to handle it? How big is big regarding the pileup? I must admit that my first shift on the radio was daunting but seemed to be going alright. I contest from home and understand rates, etc. However, the pileups in a contest are one thing, these were unbelievable! On the second evening of the operation, I was sitting back to back with Bob Allphin, K4UEE when he tapped me on the shoulder and said, "I've never heard anything like this", and smiled broadly. He was referring to the size of the pileup. A little later, he tapped me again and repeated the earlier statement and smiled bigger than ever. I knew when someone with Bob's experience was saying this; I was experiencing something really special.

The pileup continued at a feverish pace throughout the entire time we were there. By the last day of the DXpedition the pileups actually increased for operators as various stations and antennas were being packed for the return home.

On the next page are tables that show the overall results of the operation. Additionally, there were 32,807 unique callsigns, which is an excellent measure of the success of the DXpedition. This points to the fact that our goal of working everyone who needed the island for an all-time new one got one!

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Also, 40% of the contacts were with Europe and Asia; another goal achieved.

- ✓ 115,787 total QSOs
- ✓ 30M record – 5870 Qs
- ✓ 32,807 unique callsigns!

✓	Africa	595
✓	Asia	4,202
✓	Europe	41,782
✓	North America	66,075
✓	Oceania	801
✓	South America	2,243

✓	QW	57,317
✓	SSB	51,819
✓	RTTY	6,589
✓	Satellite	55
✓	SSTV	3
✓	BME	2

✓	6m	96	✓	20m	27,022
✓	10m	230	✓	30m	15,657
✓	12m	907	✓	40m	16,126
✓	15m	10,751	✓	80m	16,219
✓	17m	21,503	✓	160m	7,215

First cooperative DXpedition between USFWS, researchers & DXers.....

An essential part of this DXpedition was to demonstrate to the USFWS that amateur radio could be long term partner to assist in the mission of the Service. Our intent was to repair a negative view of our hobby. It was clear by the level of detail provided in the KP1-5 Project proposal that a comprehensive plan had been put together. However, words are one thing; now it was time to prove it.

This was a three-pronged cooperative mission. From our standpoint we were to establish and provide the infrastructure to sustain USFWS personnel, the research biologist and ourselves for the 14-day period. This meant providing for 25 people per day. Sometimes the number was even higher based on the amount of refuge work that was taking place.

A significant portion of the 7-tons of equipment and supplies transported to the island was needed to setup and support camp operations. Twenty-five people equate to 75 meals a day; therefore a person was hired to be responsible for this. In addition to



Cooperation between DXers and USFWS personnel was evident even in the mundane task of washing meal dishes!

the meals themselves, we provided eating facilities, showers, toilets, drinking water, potable water and much more. This was no small task and one that was greatly appreciated by our host and the researchers. Normally, they have limited facilities when doing work on the refuges.

The USFWS personnel provided security for the group as well as conducting refuge work. Because of Desecheo's location it is a favorite place for human smugglers to drop off people, mainly from the Dominican Republic, who are headed for a better life in Puerto Rico. There were many signs of their presence around the helipad. Also, the island has been used as a drug drop off as well. One day a boat appeared and circled our location and later anchored off shore through the night. It was very suspicious since the name on the boat could not be found in the maritime records. The following morning, the boat was gone. Needless to say we all felt secure and slept well as our host provided 24-hour surveillance.



USFWS personnel track a suspicious boat.

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Our hosts coordinate their day's activities.

The scientist and biologists who joined us were from an organization named Island Conservation. They are a highly specialized group of scientists that

focus on restoration of islands around the world whose ecosystem have been affected by human, environmental or feral animal factors. In this case they were doing work for the USFWS that will eventually return Desecheo to its original natural balance.

We quickly learned to appreciate the dedication and ruggedness of these people. They rose before daybreak and returned to camp just before sunset. Between these times they were



Island Conservation briefs us on their organization and activities.

trekking up, down and around this rugged and desolate island. The wildlife on Desecheo is sparse; mainly iguanas, snakes, spider, hermit crabs and scorpions. We would occasionally see sea birds but the island should be covered with them.

Desecheo was once the home to the largest Brown Booby colony in the world. They are all gone because of the introduction of feral animals by humans. These feral animals are monkeys, goats and rats...rats...rats! From the first night we arrived to last night on the island, they were our constant companions. They circled the kitchen area. They ran to and fro through the operating tent. If we heard the occasional scream in the middle of the night, we knew someone had a furry-friend try to bed down with them. This happened on more than one occa-

sion! One night, late in the DXpedition, I felt something on my left foot. I looked down to find one of our furry friends calmly setting atop my shoe. I looked at him; he looked at me and with the flick of my foot, he scampered off. Such was life on Desecheo.

Miscellaneous and Closing.....

When I was asked to write this article, I wondered what to say; so I asked INDEXA Editor John Scott, K8YC, what might interest the readers. I found his list interesting and here are the answers to those items:

How did it feel walking around a retired "bomb range" with unexploded ordnance?

The island was in fact a bombing range at various points in its history. When the recon team was on the island, the UXO technician located potential sites in the immediate area we would be operating in. These sites were marked and ALL personnel were shown their locations and the protocol to be followed regarding the area. One of the impact craters was immediately behind 'Desecheo Power and Light' (generators); so we were very careful when we serviced the generators, especially at night. Shrapnel from various pieces of ordinance was observed around the camp which made us aware of the concern.

After all we've heard about USFWS, how was it to work with them?

To a person, the USFWS personnel were complete professionals, dedicated to the mission of the Service. Having said that, they are warm and friendly and very impressed with the professional way this DXpedition was planned and executed. They were a great help before, during and after the operation. We certainly understand much better the daunting task they have to preserve and restore our natural resources. They have a much better understanding of amateur radio and appreciate our dedication to it. We believe this operation went a long way in building a relationship with the USFWS and amateur radio.

Why was a "security force" needed? To protect you, or to keep you from taking a walk over the island?

The answer is, both were reasons for security.

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Our hosts have an intimate knowledge of the island; therefore their presence would provide the greatest possibility of a safe DXpedition. As an example, some in the group wanted to snorkel during their free time. As it turns out, just yards off the shore near the helipad, a very dangerous rip tide exists because of the island's contour. A few weeks earlier a scuba driver was swept out to sea from this area and was never recovered. So their insight and assistance on the island was invaluable. Secondly, the risk of illegal aliens coming ashore is real. Their past presence on the island was obvious. There was the one instance of a suspicious boat in the area and one night there was an interdiction just a few miles off the island. All in all we slept well because our host was keeping a watchful eye for us.

It seemed like the on-ground logistics were pretty amazing. At least Gregg, W6IZT, in a hamfest presentation, indicated your "man on the ground" in Puerto Rico was a "man of the hour".

Gregg, W6IZT is certainly correct about this. Desecheo is an interesting DX location. How many prized DX islands lay a mere 14-miles from a mainland that has Wal-Mart, Home Depot and all the groceries and supplies you need for a DXpedition? Because of this unique situation, it was more cost effective to acquire large amounts of the necessary supplies in Puerto Rico rather than in the States and ship them.

Our 'Man-on-the-Ground' was Eladio, WP3MW. Eladio worked tirelessly before we arrived to coordinate shipments from the States, arranging for equipment and supplies in Puerto Rico. When we arrived, he worked night and day as the tempo rose to a crescendo with D-day approaching. He continued to make things happen during the first week on the island and even as we returned to the mainland. So, if you run across WP3MW on the air, thank him; because without his dedicated help, Desecheo 2009 would not have been the DXpedition that it was.

We must also thank Felipe, NP4Z for his help in arranging helicopters initially and for Team 3 when the storm hit as well as other help.

The members of the K5D team wish to thank the corporate sponsors, the clubs/associations who offered sizable financial support (Desecheo DXpedition Japan Foundation, NCDXF, INDEXA, DX Lovers Foundation, GDXF, Lone Star DX Assn., Southeast DX Club, SWODXA, Swiss DX Foundation, Tokyo 610 DX Club, Twin Cities DX Assn., West Virginia DX Assn.), and the hundreds of associations AND individual contributors who helped make K5D possible. Our website attempts to recognize all of you.

To wrap things up, I hope you have enjoyed my perspective of this adventure of a lifetime. I'll leave you with a visual that we enjoyed each evening, i.e. a beautiful sunset. I hope to contact you from another interesting location, soon! —Mike, NA5U



A beautiful sunset from "EU Ridge" with the A3WS in the foreground.

2009 Elections and other miscellany. . . .

Last year, your officers tried a “new wrinkle” in our voting process. That change was to perform our voting via an electronic submission process. The benefits were that a member did not have to reprint the ballot formerly included in the newsletter (or alternatively tear apart the newsletter) nor did he have to expend postage to return the ballot. The results on the receiving end were that ballots came back quickly, were easily tallied, and an improved percentage of members voted.

It didn't take long for us to figure that this was a process worthy of adoption. For the very few members who do not or cannot receive email, Secretary-Treasurer Jennings will send a paper ballot via regular mail.

The ballot for 2009 officers and directors will be going out about the same time as this newsletter. In fact, you may have already received your ballot announcement with the voting procedure specified. The officers and directors encourage you to vote.

Sneak Peek. . . .

In the coming weeks, we hope to provide you a special summer issue reporting on the Bhutan DXpedition (A5100A) of November, 2008.

Predictions regarding the “next” solar cycle that just doesn't seem to want to rev up seem to be coming out monthly these days. Yet from the activity being sponsored by INDEXA in 2009, one cannot surmise that lack of solar activity has negated radio propagation. A check of the INDEXA website (www.indexa.org) shows the following INDEXA sponsored DXpeditions for 2009:

Palestine	E44M	January
Desecheo	K5D	February
Lord Howe Is.	VK9L	March/April
Western Sahara	S04R	April

Coming up:

Glorioso Is.	FT5GA	Pending
Fiji	3D2G	September
Tuvalu	T2G	September
Kiribati/Tarawa	T30G	September
Midway Is.	K4M	October
Sable Is.	CY0	October

Thank you, members, for supporting INDEXA's goal of helping to bring you rare DX.

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